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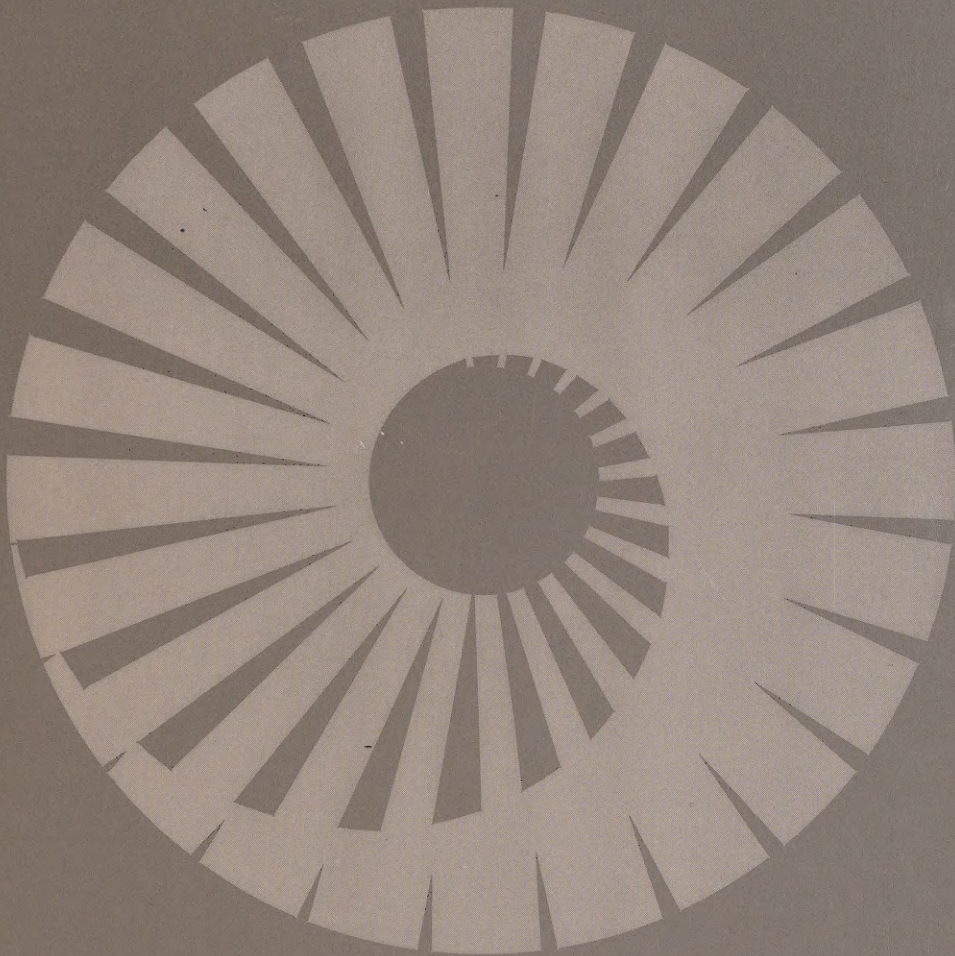
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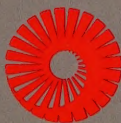
PLAYING HIDE AND SEEK WITH QWL

by

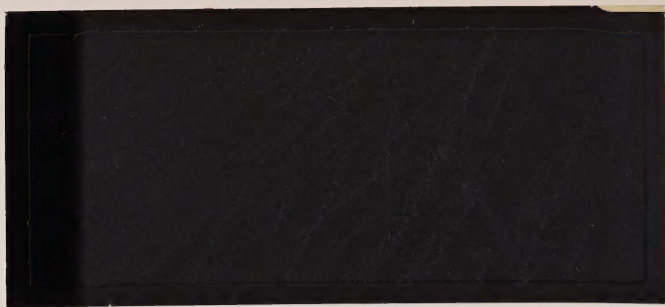
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# PLAYING HIDE AND SEEK WITH QWL

by

Hans van Beinum\*

Hidden behind the words "quality of working life" there is a multitude of interpretations and points of view. In fact, the late Dr. Unguisson, a renowned Canadian physician and, as a result, is entitled to have his professional opinion of some significance. In this discussion, we will try to identify some of the main reasons for this state of affairs.

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## PREFACE

Discussions about quality of working life (QWL) are often characterized by confusion, misunderstanding and lack of proper definition. The fact that there is a common term, QWL, which is being widely used, does not mean that there is a uniform and shared understanding.

Hidden behind the words "quality of working life" lies a multitude of interpretations and points of view. In fact, the term QWL disguises a rather Babelonian situation and, as a result, is setting the scene for a political dilemma of some significance. In this discussion, we will try to identify some of the main reasons for this state of affairs.



## 1. THE DEFINITION

Probably the most common, confusing and somewhat misleading use of the term QWL, is as a general concept, referring to a wide range of conditions, approaches and methods dealing with the physical, social, economic and psychological factors affecting the wellbeing of workers. From a linguistic point of view, it is quite appropriate to call this entire domain "QWL." However, this semantically correct use of the term QWL is also very deceptive.

In retrospect, when the term QWL was coined in the early '70s, it was probably a mistake for the various international networks that had been working for many years in the field of the democratization of work, to use this label when forming themselves in 1972 into the International Council for QWL. By using that term, we obscured the democratic thrust that was the real meaning of the new forms of work organization, thus creating confusion and hindering its development.

QWL refers to an explicit set of values, concepts, and methods for the design of jobs and organizations in terms of direct industrial democracy -- that is, work systems in which people are directly involved in the decision making process affecting their job and work environment.

The conceptual basis of QWL rests on the notion that organizations have the characteristics of open socio-technical systems. The technical system comprises the equipment, the material, the plant and process lay out, with its particular characteristics and requirements. The social system is made up of people in the work organization with their particular physical, psychological and cultural characteristics and requirements that they bring to it and their organization, both formal and informal. The social and technical systems are interdependent and complementary. Designing a work organization which is effective and adaptive means meeting the requirements of both technology and people, i.e. co-designing the technical and social systems in such a way that they accommodate and support each other in the best "fit" possible. It recognizes that people have multiple capabilities and fundamental social and psychological needs pertaining to work.







The development of an organization based on QWL design principles leads to a basic change in the fundamental building block of the organization. There is a shift from the traditional, fragmented and dissociating one person-one task structure to the development of semi-autonomous and self-regulating work groups. These groups consist of a number of people who collectively have the responsibility and the skill to manage a set of interdependent tasks which together form a natural whole.

QWL was the phrase selected to denote this field of study and practice which had been developed since the 1950s.

It relates the need for adaptation and effectiveness of organizations to the adaptive and multiple capabilities of people. QWL is a new organizational paradigm, which integrates the democratization of work and the economic performance of the organization.

Notwithstanding the origin of the term, the current use of QWL includes many different meanings. Today QWL stands for a wide variety of approaches, which include such practices as quality circles, job enrichment, profit-sharing, union-management collaboration, and various forms of the parallel structures. Most of these are entirely unrelated to the conception of organizational design and the democratization of work. Furthermore, most of the time the term QWL is not, or is rather poorly, explained. Consequently, we cannot understand what is meant by QWL unless we know the precise way in which this term is being applied.

## 2. CONFUSION AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS

A rather simple but common confusion in the discussion about QWL is caused by the term being used to mean both cause and effect.

On the one hand, it is used as an expression of a state of affairs, as the outcome of certain conditions, as the evaluation of people's experience at work.

On the other hand, QWL is used to indicate a causal factor, such as a specific action, a certain



approach required in order to change the features of the work situation. It refers to the introduction and promotion of specific conditions, which are considered desirable and which are expected to have certain effects.

To use the term QWL in these two different ways is not necessarily wrong, as long as we make it clear which meaning is intended.

A more fundamental misunderstanding of QWL is through a general lack of appreciation of its contextual significance. This is particularly true when QWL is used in its original meaning of a new organizational paradigm, i.e. the democratization of the workplace through the processes of participative design or redesign.

It is not always realized that QWL is a rather radical perspective, with significant societal implications, and which usually requires fundamental changes in both the structure and the processes of an entire organization. Because QWL is an organizational design strategy, it affects the total organization and cannot be pursued in isolation from organizational objectives, values and policies. By not recognizing and understanding the fundamental and encompassing meaning of QWL, we entertain rather naive expectations about its development and diffusion.

On a more basic and deeper psychological level, there are unconscious fears and irrational resistances. These have to do with the fact that open and direct participation and involvement gives rise to all kinds of anxieties.

Similar to the fear of freedom, as discussed by Erich Fromm in his famous publication of 1942, there is a fear of democracy. The unpredictable and unfolding character of direct industrial democracy is a threatening phenomenon. It does not provide the "safe" traditional bureaucratic structures and procedures, with their suggestion that they will protect us from uncertain futures.

Direct involvement and engagement will unlock the human potential, the multiple capabilities of people. But it can also unleash the darker side of the human condition and therefore will make new and greater demands on our ability to recognize and deal with the whole person.





### 3. QWL AND UNION-MANAGEMENT RELATIONS

A distinct area of confusion is encountered when QWL is considered in the context of the political reality of union-management relations. The combination of the values and notions of QWL, and the traditions and practices of industrial relations, opens up a whole new field of issues. It releases a new range of opportunities for appreciating as well as for misunderstanding and misusing QWL.

By position, by right and by responsibility, both unions and management are inherently linked to QWL. Human dignity in the workplace is by definition a matter of primary concern to the union. Similarly, the use and development of human resources are an integral part of the management process. Therefore, in unionized organizations, unions and management must be jointly involved in QWL, and must share responsibility for the process. Although QWL will not do away with conflict or with the adversarial system, it will facilitate a more mature and constructive process of conflict resolution. Above all, QWL will allow unions and management to identify and develop areas of mutual interest and concern.

However, the undeniable logic of the joint involvement of union and management in QWL, does not necessarily lead to a joint understanding of QWL or to an active joint engagement in this process. The combination of the political characteristics of union-management relations and the meaning of QWL can result in a potent mixture. This can lead to a powerful process of constructive and creative developments, as well as to a situation with rather strong and firmly fixed negative views about QWL and organizational change.

Some of the key features of this relationship between QWL and joint union-management involvement can be illustrated by examining the differences associated with two fundamentally different approaches.

If we take as point of departure QWL as an explicit strategy for designing work systems and organizations, which is then subsequently developed in the context of union-management relations, a distinctive and very fundamental process of change is initiated.



Since QWL is concerned with the design of systems, it will not only change the work place. It will also have an impact on the organization of both management and the trade union, as well as on the system characteristics governing the relationship between union and management.

In this approach, union-management cooperation is regarded both as a critical condition for the development of QWL, and as a consequence of QWL activities. However, it should not be equated with QWL.

If, on the other hand, we take as point of departure the desire to develop cooperation between union and management, and subsequently an area for cooperation is selected, quite a different process is involved.

The cooperation may be about profit-sharing, health and safety, quality circles, or training, but mostly it is not concerned with the organization of work. Labour-management committees and similar forms of worker involvement are good illustrations of this development. Here, union-management cooperation and QWL are almost defined as synonymous.

Since organizational design is usually not part of this second approach, there is rarely a direct impact on the organization features of either union or management. Furthermore, because union and management are not jointly involved in learning about a system's change, it is unlikely that this approach will lead to any significant changes in the basic characteristics of the union-management relationships.

In fact, this second approach may well reinforce the existing work system; union and management may find it difficult to change to a QWL orientation dealing with structural change.

Occasionally, the point of departure and the content and nature of the cooperation will reinforce each other, leading unions and management away from QWL design strategies. Indeed, union-management cooperation can become a defence against QWL, where neither party is interested in structural change.

Despite the great differences in assumptions and values between the two points of departure, the term





QWL is used to describe both approaches. Needless to say, this only adds to the confusion about the meaning and merit of QWL.

#### 4. TYPES OF MISUSE

Quite another kind of difficulty in QWL discussion is caused by statements that have nothing to do with the subject. In these cases, the term QWL is a misnomer, and often used as some kind of "scapegoat."

The spectrum of misuses includes false applications, where there is an obvious contradiction with the values and principles of QWL. This includes practices and approaches in the workplace intended to reduce the role of unions or even to decertify unions and which go blatantly under the label QWL.

A more complex misuse of the term is when views about QWL are really referring to the various conditions considered necessary to engage fruitfully in the process. These can range from questions on job security, remuneration, or health and safety, to concerns expressed in attitudes that are embedded on a deeper psychological level.

For instance, people think they are commenting on QWL, when in actual fact they are making a judgment about the motivation of the other party, or about how much the other can be trusted in a process of cooperation. Hidden behind these views about motivation and trust, we often find uncertainty and doubt about an ability to control situations or influence the decisions of the other party. Feelings of insecurity and lack of power are often expressed by way of negative statements about QWL.

Another example of misusing the term QWL is seen when management or unions declare themselves "against QWL." In fact, they are expressing unease about new demands that will be made on them. It has to do with feelings of anxiety about personal competence and with the ability of the management or union system to cope with new and somewhat unpredictable demands.

In these cases people are again not so much criticizing QWL, they are expressing their own fears and uncertainties about being able to deal with new situations.



A rather devious way of misusing the term QWL is to use it as a tool for conceptual and emotional manipulation. By reinforcing or even creating an ambiguous understanding of QWL, it can be used as a powerful image. Particularly in association with other negative notions and feelings, it is easy to use QWL in such a way that it will play on the emotions and anxieties of the audience. QWL then becomes an easy target and a fertile ground for negative projection.

The most damaging misuse of QWL takes place when it is used as a means only. This happens, for instance, if the only motivation to develop QWL is to increase productivity. When we start to "materialize" human values, and undertake so-called experiments with QWL in order to find out whether "it" works, we begin to deny the value of human dignity. QWL is a process, a direction, and not a thing. When we reduce participatory democracy to a commodity, we undermine the very basis of our democratic society.

## 5. QWL -- A SOCIO-POLITICAL PROCESS

The development of QWL in the organization is not a quick fix, it is not the application of a "technique." It is a long and complex process of fundamental organizational change, which includes changes in the structure of work, changes in attitudes and in relationships.

QWL is above all a process of search and learning. Every work system has to translate the values and principles of QWL in terms of the specific circumstances of its own situation. The opportunity for autonomy on the job, for variety in work, for learning, and for working together, will differ for each production system and technology. We have to recognize that each organization, in view of its own identity, cannot but write its own distinct "QWL story." However, for such an "individualized" process of QWL development to be on target, it presupposes a clear general understanding of the values, principles and notions of QWL.

QWL refers to something that is very real and very significant for all of us, because it involves the daily reality of the world of work. Because the undefined and ambiguous use of this term is continuing





in both popular and professional publications and discussions, we are inclined to conclude that this practice is not just an example of the careless and untidy use of language. To the contrary, it seems to be something of a deliberate act, although it is probably in most cases an unconscious act.

It is a deliberate act in the sense that the undefined and vague use of this encompassing term will allow us to avoid dealing with the political dimensions of the work situation. In that way we do not have to make public choices about controversial issues; neither will we be confronted with the consequences of our choice. Language can be used to keep us away from reality. It can act as a screen, as a defence mechanism against becoming personally engaged with critical issues in the real world of work. Language is not only a mirror that reflects our beliefs, fears and confusions, it is also our most powerful tool.

Probably the most unique feature of QWL is that it does not only allow, but in fact encourages and indeed requires the organization to relate its culture and distinctive competence to the values of its environment. To that extent it requires the use of language that is in accordance with the human values of our society. The development of QWL demands a practical and direct language that will encompass both societal and organizational values. More specifically it must be able to connect the democratization of work with democracy in a societal sense. In this way it will clarify and legitimize the meaning and practice of direct personal participation.

Language will then be used not only in a reactive manner to maintain a certain level of consciousness and in many cases to mask anxiety about direct democracy. To the contrary, it will then be used pro-actively as a tool to widen our consciousness and assist us to engage with ourselves as well as with our organizational reality.

This will not be an easy task, as it means that we have to discontinue playing our game of conceptual and linguistic hide and seek with the meaning of QWL.

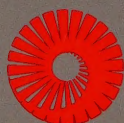








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